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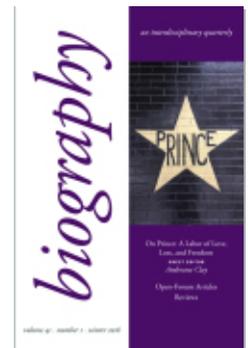
“A Very Strange Relationship”: Life Writing,  
Overwriting, and the Scandal of Biography in the  
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**“A VERY STRANGE RELATIONSHIP”**  
LIFE WRITING, OVERWRITING, AND THE SCANDAL OF  
BIOGRAPHY IN THE GORDIMER-ROBERTS AFFAIR

HEDLEY TWIDLE

CORRECTION: A previous version of this article was published in the print edition of *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2018. A corrigendum is published in *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2018, that outlines the edits made to this version of the article.

*Thus we have the thickest volumes on some of the strangest subjects.*

—Steve Biko

On the back cover of Ronald Suresh Roberts’s biography of the South African novelist and Nobel laureate in literature there appears, instead of the usual blurbs, an image of a *Sunday Times* poster. “GORDIMER BANS BOOK” reads the headline that appeared, the caption explains, “days after Nadine Gordimer attempted to stop the publication of *No Cold Kitchen*, August 11, 2004.” Like so much else in this book, the various components that make up the paratext are in an odd and dissonant relation to each other. Below the photograph is an excerpt from a letter that Gordimer wrote to Roberts dated January 16, 2003, full of praise for his work in progress:

The critical writing—yours—about my work, its development, its contradictions as well as its creative solutions painfully arrived at, its relation, through me and my involvement [*sic*], with politics and the history-as-politics that we call “our times”—all this is outstandingly excellent.

The gatefold cover is full of similar tributes, taken not (as is usual) from advance reviews, but rather from private correspondence to the author on his unpublished manuscript. There is high praise from editors at Bloomsbury in London and Farrar, Straus and Giroux (FSG) in New York—the prestigious publishing houses for which the authorized version was initially destined. In December 2002, Jonathan Galassi, head of FSG and at the time one of the most powerful literary arbiters in the English-speaking world, writes, “You bring Nadine and her various worlds marvellously alive. I don’t know anything of her reaction yet, but my own hunch is that she too—once she has absorbed the shocks that being written about so intently must give rise to—will be taken with, glad about, what you have done.”

This, obviously, was not how the story unfolded. Having for years given Roberts privileged access to her papers and correspondence, on condition that she would have the right of final review, Gordimer was displeased with some aspects of the first full draft sent to her on Christmas Day 2002 and demanded changes that her biographer was unwilling to make. Details of an affair she had in the 1950s, an account of the decline and death of her husband Reinhold Cassirer that she found distasteful, a deadlock over Roberts’s portrayal of her attitude to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—these were among the flashpoints where the rival claims of Gordimer’s authorization and Roberts’s authorial autonomy had, it seems, become incommensurable (Donadio).

Gordimer eventually revoked her authorization of the project and prevailed on its international publishers (which were also her publishers) to drop the book, which they did. And so *No Cold Kitchen* appeared, complete with its cryptic title and unusual packaging, via STE Publishers in Johannesburg, a self-described black-empowerment initiative.<sup>1</sup> Following publication in 2005, Gordimer put out a statement that the presentation of the work garlanded with her praise was misleading. She had only seen the final artifact when it appeared on shelves in Johannesburg and claimed that the book as published contained “changes including highly offensive additions,” in breach of her final right of review (qtd. in Naidu 2).

Reconstructing exactly what happened between the novelist and her biographer is perhaps impossible by now; in any case it is not the primary aim here. Rather, my approach seeks to read the text itself as an example of a life writing project that slips its moorings and runs out of control. As such, this case study forms part of a larger project that seeks to read across a series of ambitious and intellectually risky postapartheid biographies, including Jacob Dlamini’s account of political collaboration and betrayal during the liberation struggle in *Askari* (2014); Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s engagement with

a notorious apartheid killer in *A Human Being Died That Night* (2003); Mark Gevisser's enormously detailed psychobiography of democratic South Africa's second president, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (2007); and Jonny Steinberg's substantial body of work concerning lives caught up in rural violence, prison gangs, the HIV-AIDS epidemic, and transnational migrancy in, respectively, *Midlands* (2002), *The Number* (2004), *Three-Letter Plague* (2008), and *A Man of Good Hope* (2014). If these lives are ambitious, then perhaps they are overambitious, or overdetermined—by which I mean that they tend to exceed or overspill their ostensible subjects and become coded, unsettled discourses about other things. Often, they show a kind of lopsidedness or formal unevenness, warped or bent out of shape by their own determinations in writing across the unresolved differences of the postcolony.

By turns brilliantly perceptive and pretentiously opaque, veering between incisive criticism and gratuitous polemic, *No Cold Kitchen* is a baggy monster of a biography that (most reviewers agreed) needed far more editorial cutting, shaping, and discipline; but which in its very excess and formal misbehavior provides a compelling case study in the ethics and cultural politics of a literary life. It is precisely the unruly excess, or excessiveness, of such life writing projects that I am interested in tracing to address the complex epistemic terrain of the postapartheid, or rather post-transitional, moment. Tracking Gordimer's complex response to the challenge of Black Consciousness (BC) thought from the 1970s, *No Cold Kitchen* both examines and then becomes implicated in a lingering series of difficulties produced by a history of unequal access to narrative, self-determination, and cultural power.

"One of the most difficult things to do these days is to talk with authority on anything to do with African culture," runs the opening line of a 1971 paper by BC leader Steve Biko. Roberts quotes this line during the course of a biography that doubles as a sustained attack on the unreality and hypocrisy of a certain strain of white South African liberalism as a political stance. It was one, claimed Biko, that professed an opposition to racial inequality while nonetheless assuming an undue epistemic command over the lives of others. He goes on:

Somehow Africans are not expected to have any deep understanding of their own culture or even themselves. Other people have become authorities on all aspects of African life or to be more accurate on BANTU life. Thus we have the thickest volumes on some of the strangest subjects—even "the feeding habits of the Urban Africans," a publication by a fairly "liberal" group, Institute of Race Relations. (Biko 44)

Half a century after Biko's challenge, in the wake of recent student activism on South African campuses and renewed debates about decolonizing education, the latent subject remains the matter of authority: how it is constructed or unraveled, earned or assumed; how it might replicate previous, historically painful modes of being authoritative about others—or how it might refuse or evade them. This debate also raises the question of who can plausibly be a researcher and who a research “subject,” especially in a literary and cultural system so deformed by colonial and apartheid aftermaths.

Exploring the reception and then the rhetorical forms of *No Cold Kitchen* reveals much about the postapartheid settlement in a larger sense: its conditions of rhetorical possibility, its cultural strictures, and the contours of its increasingly fragile expressive spaces. The first section of this essay maps some coordinates of the controversy; the rest turns to the work itself, tracing its curious metamorphosis from bracing criticality to corrosive hostility, reading for (to use a phrase from Roberts on Gordimer's own fiction) “a poetics of interpersonal power that the crude word ‘politics’ cannot capture” (*No Cold Kitchen* 267).

#### NADINE AND RONALD, “GORDIMER” VS. “ROBERTS”

The Gordimer-Roberts affair, wrote one commentator, “provided our small and all-too-tranquil literary world with its finest ruckus in years” (Dawes 25). Nonetheless, it might be seen as part of a cluster of disputes concerning cultural authority in the first decade of democratic South Africa. Controversy over the postapartheid representation of |Xam and !Kung indigenous oratures by poets, artists, and museum curators; the long-running accusations of appropriation surrounding works like Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (1998) and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000); a whole series of moral panics over South African writers being plagiarists—each of these cases had their own dynamics and specificities.<sup>2</sup> Yet they are suggestive of a broader, revisionist moment of postapartheid reconstruction when new and ambitious exercises in historical recovery and cultural border-crossing were attempted, when certain archives held in trust moved into wider circulation, or when intricate and complex articulations of knowledge *in situ* passed from the domain of the specialists or specific communities to a more general audience. Forms of literary journalism, life writing, and narrative nonfiction became key genres through which the meanings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)—that vast release of narrative into the public domain—were mediated and interpreted to a wider audience. And all this was happening in the 1990s when “the new South Africa” was rejoining a globalizing international

world, when its insularity or lag time in the wake of the cultural boycott was becoming entangled in rapid transnational circuits of goods, capital, concepts, and personnel.<sup>3</sup>

Roberts's cultural positioning in South Africa was in some ways an index of this postapartheid reconstruction process. A child of West Indian and Indo-Malaysian parents, Roberts grew up in Trinidad and attended Oxford's Balliol College on the same scholarship that had been won by V. S. Naipaul. Roberts then worked as a lawyer in New York before arriving in South Africa "as the coordinator of an international election monitoring delegation" (according to the dustjacket copy of *No Cold Kitchen*). He coauthored a book on the TRC with lawyer and ANC intellectual Kader Asmal and increasingly styled himself as a scourge of the liberal commentariat and as a maverick, unaffiliated commentator on the transition—someone introducing the bracing edge of United States culture wars into a South African system that was too placid. On the other hand, his detractors deemed him an opportunistic "carpetbagger" and even an intellectual "hit man" for the ruling party, suspicious of how quickly he had inveigled himself into the administrations of presidents Mandela and Mbeki as policy researcher and speechwriter (Barron; Wilhelm). His subsequent 2007 biography *Fit to Govern: The Native Intelligence of Thabo Mbeki*, was widely condemned as sycophantic and also dogged by allegations of considerable financial support brokered by the presidency as well as accusations of plagiarism.<sup>4</sup>

Roberts evokes the divisive figure of Naipaul in his preface to *No Cold Kitchen* as a kind of foil or counterpoint to Gordimer, given their diametrically opposed attitudes toward Black-led liberation and the prospects of the postcolonial world: "In her you see intricacies of affirmation; in him . . . rarifications of disgust" (25). He goes on to invoke the South African novelist's lifelong dissent from a racialized identity:

If Gordimer was making a way out of whiteness, Naipaul seemed to be inbound on the reverse journey. . . . "It was my wish, in Mississippi, to consider things from the white point of view," Naipaul actually wrote in *A Turn in the South* (1989), "as far as was possible for me." Gordimer's objectives were quite neatly the reverse. (25)

Yet by the end of the biography, Gordimer has been reconsigned to a form of whiteness and Roberts has shifted to a different comparator, ridiculing her outmoded positions on world politics via his intimacy with another public intellectual, Edward Said, to whom the biography (in another curious paratextual moment) is dedicated. How and why had the initial poetics of affirmation curdled into one of disdain and disgust? What exactly had transpired in the interval between Gordimer's admiring letters and the withdrawal of her

blessing? Such matters were picked over as the feud was relayed and discussed in the South African press and abroad, since, unlike some of the other cultural scandals of the 1990s, this one traveled.

The Gordimer-Roberts affair made its way into Hermione Lee's primer *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (2009) as an example of how efforts by living subjects, relatives, or executors to control a biographer can backfire. In this case Gordimer was exposed "to just the kind of gossipy publicity she had wanted to avoid" as well as "sarcastic remarks about the paradoxical contrast between Gordimer's own resistance to the repressive era of apartheid and her 'censoring' of his work" (98). The invoking of apartheid repression simultaneously became entangled with the political torsions of the post-Mandela era, as Roberts contrasted his two biographical subjects via a provocatively cross-wired comparison: "My experience with Gordimer is that she acted in relation to the manuscript like the stereotype of Thabo Mbeki, an autocratic control freak. He's acted in the last two years like the stereotype of Nadine Gordimer, a champion of intellectual liberty" (Donadio).

Yet what did the withdrawal of authorization mean, exactly? In his *Essays on Biography* (2005), Carl Rollyson remarks, "The modern way to censor or suppress an authorized biography is to carefully ration or withhold permission to quote from the biographical subject's unpublished work" (3). This was the case with Peter Ackroyd's life of T. S. Eliot (which was forced to rely on paraphrasing all correspondence), and perhaps most famously in Ian Hamilton's dealings with J. D. Salinger. The reclusive writer sued for infringement of copyright and won, even though his biographer had quoted only modestly from his correspondence in accordance with his own understanding of the "fair use" doctrine. In writing the first published version of this article, I had assumed that this option was not exercised by Gordimer or her lawyers, given that the biography is laden with quotations from both her published and her unpublished writing. Yet in an extensive personal correspondence with me, Roberts explained that Gordimer's lawyers did raise the supposed copyright prohibition "in a formal threatening demand letter, but were rebuffed by my own publisher's lawyers, who emphasized that Gordimer in reality had no such option, because of the clear terms of the contract between us (an advantage that Ian Hamilton lacked)."

The question about the withdrawal of authorization is an amorphous one, concerned with the vagaries of interpersonal trust and a network of silent assumptions. Reflecting on his earlier authorized biography of Lowell, Hamilton remarks that authorization can be "a narrow licence": "For all that you enjoyed this magic-sounding right of access, you still had to be endlessly judging and rejudging limits of propriety" (10). Or as Shaun de Waal, the literary editor of South Africa's *Mail & Guardian*, put it from the opposite direction: "It is presumed that the biographer will be sensitive and just in his or her use

of such material" (3). The delicate phrasing and passive voice is telling: just such tacit presumptions and sensitivities had been ridden over rough-shod following Roberts's ambitious forays with a xerox into the novelist's personal archive. As Roberts writes in his acknowledgments, Gordimer gave him "more than 20 000 pages . . . from her private correspondence," above and beyond his unrestricted access to the Lilly Library's Gordimer archive in Indiana (8). When her home photocopying machine, "a doughty veteran from the 1980s," surrendered under the strain and had to be replaced, "she hardly grumbled" (8).

"In such a trust necessarily lies the possibility of betrayal," de Waal continued, "and it is hard to believe that a writer of Gordimer's sensitivity or one of Suresh Roberts's gimlet keenness can have failed to imagine that possibility, or even its inevitability" (4). This edge of risk and brinkmanship captures something of the game that unfolds in the work. "Ronald is my biographer," Gordimer is reported to say in the final chapter, when introducing him to a publisher in London: "'He is *dangerous*.' She paused with the kind of grimace easily mistaken for a smile: 'It's a very strange relationship'" (628). The hazard and even relish of having an acerbic, possibly dangerous figure at work on her life is presented as a kind of subplot in the biography; yet ultimately this was a gambit that escaped the Nobel laureate's control. Roberts's wholesale duplication of Gordimer's private correspondence and then the appearance of personal letters in the South African press when a prepublication excerpt of *No Cold Kitchen* was run in the *Sunday Times* was taken as an early sign, at least by perplexed and annoyed intimates like Susan Sontag, that the project had run out of control.<sup>5</sup>

Interviewed by South Africa's *Sunday Times* in 2004, Galassi claimed that his publishing house had independent objections to the manuscript, specifically "the meandering quality of the narrative and the author's gratuitous insertion of himself into it." If Roberts "had been more rational and measured in his approach," Galassi went on, "I believe his book could have been published as originally planned." Roberts responded, "Haven't we had enough of New York editors scolding the natives to be rational?" and told the *New York Times Book Review* he felt Gordimer "was treating me like a benefactor in a certain way, as though I was a product of patronage rather than a professional doing the work I wanted to do and doing it to the best of my abilities" (Donadio).

No stranger to public feuding, Roberts defended his de-authorized approach in high-minded terms while also fighting off Gordimer's defenders with gusto. Some commentators turned to Janet Malcolm's metaphors of biography as a kind of duplicitous seduction always doomed to go sour—one in which the writer will always be "a kind of confidence man, preying on people's

vanity, ignorance or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse”—while others suspected a more literal, calculating kind of confidence trick (Taitz 21).<sup>6</sup> Responding to an article by long-time adversary John Matshikiza, who had accused him (not in so many words) of conning an elderly woman,<sup>7</sup> Roberts suggested that his loyalty was to the work rather than the person: “To celebrate such a classic writer as Gordimer, one must discomfit the writer’s felt sense of self” (Roberts, “Gordimer’s Authentic” 31). With recourse to J. M. Coetzee’s argument that “the interrogation of the classic, no matter how hostile, is part of the history of the classic, inevitable and even to be welcomed,” Roberts argued that the most intensive forms of criticism should properly be seen as a kind of oblique tribute to the work: “For so long as the classic needs to be protected from attack, it can never prove itself a classic.<sup>7</sup> Gordimer, a writer of truly classic grandeur, needs not Matshikiza’s sadly inarticulate protections” (“Gordimer’s Authentic” 31). Having effected this slippage, where Gordimer comes to signify more a posthumous body of work rather than a living person, Roberts ends his rejoinder with the kind of overblown rhetorical flourish that made the affair so entertaining, at least to those not directly implicated: “I have not forsaken Gordimer. I have instead cast off the treacherous epaulettes of her ‘authority.’ I am Gordimer’s authentic celebrant, while Matshikiza is killing her with kindness, and himself with hypertension” (Roberts, “Gordimer’s Authentic” 32). As Rian Malan writes in his account of the rise and fall of “the unlikeable Mr Roberts,” it was “a most amusing literary scandal” (39). Yet despite the media attention at the time, very few discussions have considered the resulting work in any detail. *No Cold Kitchen* remains the only life of Gordimer yet written and brings a compelling yet unruly mass of primary material into the public domain.

### **“NOT FOR PUBLICATION”**

#### FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHIES AND BIOGRAPHICAL FICTIONS

“It is not generally known—and it is never mentioned in the official biographies—that the Prime Minister spent the first eleven years of his life, as soon as he could be trusted not to get under a car, leading his uncle about the streets” (7). So runs the opening line of “Not for Publication,” a story that lends the title to Nadine Gordimer’s 1965 collection of short fiction. The story narrates how a young boy, Praise Basetse, is taken off the streets and educated by a series of liberal white benefactors. “I begin to believe we may be able to sit him for his matric when he is just sixteen” (*Not for Publication* 15), pronounces one of them, a leftist clergyman named Father Audry (with certain similarities to the activist Father Trevor Huddleston of Sophiatown). Praise is soon revealed to be a kind of prodigy and is diligently cultivated by teachers

and well-wishers of the institutions that he passes through. Yet by the end of the story he has disappeared, and the final cadences, as in so many of Gordimer's short stories, are unresolved and ambiguous in the tradition of Chekhov and his Modernist imitators.<sup>8</sup> When Father Audry seeks out the family with whom Praise had once lived as a beggar, there is the sense that benefactor has become pursuer—one not easily distinguishable from agents of the state. In any case, we have no further access to Praise's biography, whether official or unofficial; the narrative of how he might have become the prime minister reaches an impasse, and its subject disappears from view.

"Not for Publication," we learn in *No Cold Kitchen*, was originally conceived as a novel begun in 1960 after the early international successes of books like *The Lying Days* (1953) and *A World of Strangers* (1958), as well as the regular appearance of Gordimer's short fiction in *The New Yorker*. Yet this book was a project she found herself unable to finish: "I am fighting a curious kind of self-consciousness about my writing, something I've never had before," she writes to long-term correspondent (and, eventually, authorized biographer of Nelson Mandela) Anthony Sampson on August 11, 1959: "It's something to do—everything to do—with this blasted country. You can't write a word without everyone pouncing on it and subjecting it to analysis—the colour test" (215). Five years later, in a letter to Hilary Rubinstein dated March 4, 1965, she reflects on a "real crisis in my writing at present" and the failure of a novel "that has bitten the dust all the way, something I can't master, and now finally I've abandoned it" (216). She goes on to chart the original ambitions of the project: a long-form, cross-racial fictional inhabiting of a subject position very different to those that had focalized her existing novels and an attempt to enlarge her fictional terrain in the wake of the great wave of African independence to the north:

It was to be a sort of following the boy through the maze of white encouragement, black nationalism, the hot-and-cold of being taken up, kicked around, neglected and wooed, until he put himself together and ended up in an inevitable logic of his own, on trial as a political leader, faced with the possibility of death, which, like everything else he's expected, doesn't quite come off, and turns out to be indefinite imprisonment instead. Anyway, I couldn't do it, and not being able to stopped me from doing anything else, so I hope I've seen the last of it. But it's been a blow. (216)

From an abandoned draft of twenty thousand words, Gordimer recouped a five-thousand-word story that scrupulously avoids inhabiting the consciousness of its central figure; instead, he is refracted via those around him. With its title "naming her impasse," "Not for Publication" was, Roberts writes, "a still-born fictional counterpart" to the kind of premature post-racialism

embodied by the 1950s *Drum* writer and journalist Nat Nakasa (215). In “One Man Living Through It,” Gordimer’s tribute to Nakasa following his suicide in July 1965, Gordimer called Nakasa “a new kind of man in South Africa,” one who “accepted without question and with easy dignity and natural pride his Africanness” and who took equally for granted that his identity as “a man among men, a human among fellow humans” could not be legislated out of existence (*Telling Times* 156).

Yet, the biography suggests, the critical intelligence of Gordimer’s fiction often ran ahead of her nonfiction, offering more acute and prophetic social analysis than the sometimes generalized humanist register of her essays. In this sense, the abandoned novel is an early sign of how the poetics of hybridity and cultural border-crossing of 1950s Johannesburg became steadily less viable under an entrenching police state following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre: “Gordimer could not see into the inner life, the going growth, of a black nationalist politician’s formative years spent outside the circle of kind white patronage” (*No Cold Kitchen* 215). Later we learn that the story is turned down by *The New Yorker*, the latest in a string of rejections from the magazine where Gordimer had enjoyed such precocious and regular appearances. “I have been troubled by your lack of success here in past months,” writes editor Roger Angell to Gordimer on March 23, 1964, “and I hope that you won’t think me presumptuous when I say that a number of your recent stories have given me the same feeling that this one does.” Gordimer’s passionate concern for the “problem” in her story, he suggested, had damaged her gifts as a fiction writer:

Somehow, you seem less involved with your characters as individuals, and more aware of them as representatives of a group or social class or as figures in some larger contemporary drama. We see what they represent, rather than what they are. (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 272)

Rather than literary characters, Angell saw here “figures in a sociological report,” a “case history instead of a story” (272). Angell expresses a common trope in liberal humanist critiques of literature written from politically pressured cultural systems like that of 1960s South Africa: the supposed richness and idiosyncrasy of individual character has been sublimated or traduced by the demands of the political moment.

Roberts, however, rejects this kind of simplistic dichotomy, and much of the first half of his biography seeks out a far richer and more interesting account of how to model the relation between inadequate binaries like public and private, life and work, problem and story. In his reading, Gordimer’s abandonment of the work shows a kind of intellectual maturity and steely

self-awareness: a recognition of the difficulty of writing about the psychological workings of liberal patronage—which Gordimer calls “the projection on people other than oneself, of one’s idea of who they are” (qtd. in Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen* 582)—without reproducing them.

That kind of projection could also describe the operating principle of biography, and here one sees the kind of vexed terrain that *No Cold Kitchen* enters: a biography of a “white” South African by a person of color (already a rarity in the country’s biographical annals), and one highly attentive to how the biographical subject writes, or does not write, Black lives.<sup>9</sup> Both within the short story, then, and the larger story of how the novel never came to be written, “Not for Publication” sets in motion a range of questions regarding narrative authority, technical ability, and the ethics of writing across a balkanized society, “issues that peaked fully in the roiling black consciousness period a decade later” (343), but which Gordimer had already sensed and absorbed into her creative imagination by the early 1960s.

Roberts reads Gordimer’s falling out of favor with *The New Yorker* at this moment as a kind of badge of honor—evidence of her creative imagination turning toward larger fictional ambitions and away from a magazine that was less a gold-standard of literary excellence than an insular publication unreceptive to the transnational energies and geopolitical ructions of the era (274). Able to draw on an enormous array of previously unseen material, the biographer turns to an unpublished Neustadt Prize nomination letter written by Sontag in 1987 for an articulation of this larger vision; they are, Roberts judges, “Some of the most insightful paragraphs ever written about Gordimer’s work” (275):

It seems as if absorbing the astringent lessons of modernism saps confidence in subjects. Ms Gordimer defies this modern tradition of inhibition, supposedly mandated by our historical situation as writers in the late bourgeois world, which has all great art springing from a privation rather than a plenitude of being and consciousness. She gives us an exemplary model of the fullness of the literary project. . . . Her essentially lyrical gift having been thrown on the wide screen of politics, Ms Gordimer occupies a strategic terrain in the perennial, necessary battles over the relation between art and morality, expressiveness and conscience. (qtd. in Roberts, *No Cold Kitchen* 276)

The above represents just one small strand through the thick weave of source materials that make up Roberts’s account of Gordimer’s writing life. Comparable stories of artistic creation and mutation are told about many of her works in the style of a dense mesh of correspondence and quotation that creates a thick, complicating context for her writing—an exemplary model (to adapt Sontag) of the fullness of the biographical project. In reading through

at least the first half of *No Cold Kitchen*, one can understand how the Nobel laureate would have been seduced by the kind of critical attention that her biographer offers. Rather than using the life to explain the work, Roberts often turns to the work to deepen the life, his familiarity with her oeuvre enabling us to see how her novels are in themselves often deeply biographical projects—artificial or “fake” biographies, in a sense.<sup>10</sup>

In the chapter on her key novel *Burger's Daughter* (1979), for example, we learn how Gordimer presented the manuscript to Ilse Fischer, the daughter of Communist and Afrikaner revolutionary Bram Fischer, prior to publication. The novel was not only or directly about the Fischers; it was a more general fictional exploration of white anti-apartheid radicalism, and how this was refracted within the dynamics of the renowned Struggle family. Nonetheless it had been inspired by the sight of Ilse as a young girl, waiting outside prison to visit her father. Fischer's daughter's verdict on this challenging work, “This was our life,” was taken by Gordimer as one of the most important affirmations of the “truth” of her fiction: “No critic's laudation could match it,” she remarked in her Norton Lectures, “no critic's damning could destroy it” (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 400). Set against the truth claim of the fictional version is the more limited authority of nonfiction, as Roberts reminds us of the novel's ironic portrait of Lionel Burger's official biographer, someone whom the Struggle hero's daughter describes as “respectfully coaxing me onto the stepping stones of the official vocabulary” (Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* 171).

Already we see here an intimate and cross-stitched relation between the different kinds of truth claims and psychological reach offered by the fictional and nonfictional strains in her oeuvre. Gordimer often remarked that the truth of her novels was greater because it was less susceptible to the kind of self-censoring she experienced when writing nonfiction. This revelation becomes more intriguing still when Roberts reveals that in the original jottings for *Burger's Daughter*, Gordimer had at one point envisaged writing in precisely the “real life” scene of vetting her manuscript as a self-reflexive twist at the end of the novel: “Final chapter the visit to the real daughter of such a man to explain that this that has been written is not her life but an imaginative exploration of what might have been” (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 401). This metafictional elaboration was dropped from the novel as it appears, but Roberts takes this complex entanglement of historical and novelized lives as revealing of how to approach the braiding together of found and imagined materials in the creative process: “In meeting with Ilse she was living out a script that she had initially designed for inclusion in the novel itself. This was life borrowing from art—an instance less of life being raided for art than of an artistic conceit invading the real world” (401).

In the parts of the biography that, one imagines, initially won over the Nobel laureate and her publishers, the fiction is often positioned as an internal mirror of the larger biographical project: the fiction as both evidence and theory of a life in writing. In the preface, Roberts selects a passage from her debut novel *The Lying Days* to orient his own project as one reading for “the record of the things that change rather than the things that happen” (Virginia Woolf’s formulation of the task of biography, which he quotes) and to signal how such changes might elude or escape the more obvious, externally verified, or explicit ways of gauging a life:

It is not the conscious changes made in their lives by men and women—a new job, a new town, a divorce—which really shape them, like the chapter headings in a biography, but a long, slow mutation of emotion, hidden, all-penetrative; something by which they may be so taken up that the practical outward changes of their lives in the world, noted with surprise, scandal or envy by others, pass almost unnoticed by themselves. This gives a shifting quality to the whole surface of a life. (Gordimer qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 27)

“A long, slow mutation of emotion”; “a shifting quality to the whole surface of a life”—again, the fiction-derived phrases offer ways of reading the non-fiction into which they are embedded, with Roberts ranging between the different strands of Gordimer’s written output, often cutting across chronology to create a complex and shifting prose surface of his own. The idea of a gradual emotional mutation has a still larger meta-textual significance when one considers not just the changes logged in Gordimer’s life but the shifting nature of Roberts’s biographical project itself—a modulation in the writing that was obviously driven in part by a souring relation between novelist and biographer, but which also reflects a larger, tectonic shift in its intellectual approach as the work moves across the South African transition and into the post-Mandela era.

### **AN ETHICS OF READING**

#### INTELLECTUAL LOYALTIES AND EMOTIONAL INSTINCTS

The revoking of authorization, wrote one reviewer, had in fact placed Roberts in a remarkable position. He had “all the privileges of Gordimer’s initial cooperation, but the constraints of her authorisation had been removed,” providing what “seems the ideal basis for a genuinely interesting biography, deeply informed but capable of sustaining a certain distance from its subject. It was an ethics of reading that Roberts would now have to negotiate, rather than the force of any contract (expressed or implied) with Gordimer or her publishers” (Dawes 25).

This positioning is close to how Roberts styles the biographer figure in his preface: someone who is “inevitably a kind of importuner” (29). Instead of seeking friendship, Roberts continues, “worthwhile biography seeks intimacy without loyalty, proximity laced with dissent” (29). Yet what is unsettling and difficult to capture about *No Cold Kitchen* is the way that this ethics of reading mutates or erodes over the course of its seven hundred pages. The dialectic between intimacy and dissent, initially taut and revealingly critical, becomes increasingly lopsided, moving from being just on the right side to squarely the wrong side of an interpretative zone where ambivalence shades into gratuitous polemic. What start out as methodological or stylistic strengths become glaring flaws, and in this inversion one can track how an intellectually live form of identity politics shifts into a dogmatic, punitive, and lifeless one.

At first, Roberts’s dissenting tone is a welcome corrective to the rather stultifying idea of Gordimer as a “voice of conscience” or blow-by-blow chronicler of a national story. The notion of her as “some Diva of South African history” wrote Lewis Nkosi, “able to produce a novel with the cut and fit for every twist of South African politics, has an alienating effect that is hard to describe” (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 465). Roberts channels some of Nkosi’s irreverent, unaffiliated criticality in seeking to recover a creative life that has not been retrospectively smoothed over by linear chronology or academic assimilation. Here he distinguishes his project from Stephen Clingman’s *History from the Inside: The Novels of Nadine Gordimer* (1986), probably the most widely read monograph on her work, in suggesting that Clingman presents her as “fundamentally a writer who progresses from strength to greater ideological strength with an inexorable momentum of self-betterment” (459). He points out a letter from Gordimer to Clingman in August 1980 (while Clingman was still a postgraduate student) as evidence that this pair were “allies” rather than critic and subject (461): “Down beyond sounding,” she writes, “You are that quiet young fish whose eyes beam out not only the mote that I am but the whole landscape: slaver’s wrecks, constitutional monsters, sunken white pavilions” (461).

By contrast, *No Cold Kitchen* sounds a debunking, demythologizing note from the very first pages. No quiet young fish, Roberts sets about dismantling the idea of Gordimer as a voice of historical witness, a “realist” writer “carting hard-fetched facts from the apartheid gulag” (15) by immediately introducing a note of minor scandal. The biographer reveals how her early essay “A South African Childhood,” “published in 1954 under the superintendence of the famous fact checkers of *The New Yorker*,” actually described a visit to the Kruger Park years before Gordimer had ever been there; it also entailed the invention of an entirely imaginary branch of her family. “Well, I fooled them,” Gordimer laughs when he confronts her with his sleuthing, “They

were not to know the difference" (15). The biographer's insertion of himself into the narrative here enables us to see the novelist's self-constructions but does not adopt a moralistic or punitive attitude toward the fictions that make up a life. In 1955, when Gordimer had visited the Kruger Park, we learn that she "jauntily confessed" the trickery in a letter to a friend: "after that South African childhood piece in the NY I had to make an honest woman of myself" (15). In this early part of the biography, Roberts provides us with a possible frame for Gordimer's life in writing that is in some ways richer and more flexible than her essayistic voice, with its sometimes more limited ideas of witness, honesty, and sincerity.

The biographer also foregrounds his presence during an interview with Gordimer's sister, Betty, who complains to him about the failings and "corruption" of the African National Congress (ANC) government according to the most predictable script of postapartheid whiteness. Roberts writes, "I have now been drawn into the category of Betty's mind marked 'Black Exceptions.' I am from 'overseas'; I am not like 'them.' She feels safe. She confides" (19). With a kind of associative leap that becomes a kind of stylistic tic, he goes on, "The task of biography, Sartre says, is to review in detail the history of the writer's liberation" (20). In this sense, "the meandering quality of the narrative and the author's gratuitous insertion of himself into it," to return to Jonathan Galassi's objections, have their uses, at least to begin with. In this example they compel a reflection on how two siblings could have taken entirely different intellectual and emotional trajectories through apartheid and the South African transition. The discursive, associative structure of the biography, often written in a kind of interlocking mosaic of short sections, proves itself suitable for rendering a rich and complex life that was lived in conversation with multiple audiences, constituencies, and correspondents.

As the biography follows Gordimer from early adulthood in Johannesburg through a series of travels in post-independence Africa, Gordimer's letters access a vein of nonfictional prose that Roberts reads in revealing counterpoint with her essays and travelogues. In a letter to Sampson of December 16, 1958, following a visit to Egypt, she confesses her automatic "strong unconscious identification not only with the French and English who were kicked out after Suez, but with the idea of a white minority of any kind kicked out by a dark-skinned minority [she means "majority"] of any kind, anywhere. . . . You know?" (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 123). Roberts places this quotation alongside an essay on the same experience, collected in *The Essential Gesture* (1988), where Gordimer explores how a slow process of travel, reading, and writing undid this "empathic identification with the dispossessed foreign community" (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 123). Roberts comments, "She had long thrown off the intellectual loyalties of the colonial; through her writing

she was discarding the emotional instincts as well” (123). This dialectic of intellectual loyalty and emotional instinct—how they inflect each other and yet might not always be aligned or equivalent—provides an expansive and productive frame for Gordimer’s correspondence in the early sections of the biography. Tracing the stations through which Gordimer seeks, as she put it, to “leave the house of the white race,” Roberts is able to admit and admire the kind of contradictions and self-corrections that, in later sections, he pounces on as evidence for the prosecution.<sup>11</sup> In one sense, then, the biography’s obsessive but scattershot trawl through Gordimer’s personal archives does the writer a paradoxical if painful service, with *No Cold Kitchen* bringing the reader closest to the (nonexistent) *Letters of Nadine Gordimer*. Precisely because her travel correspondence was originally premised on being kept private, or at least being treated with a certain set of discretions and sensitivities that make up an ethics of reading, the text allows a nonfictional voice more irreverent and agile than many of her essays.

The biography draws out numerous examples of her intellectual firmness and courage via the letters. Whether rebuffing an importuning acquaintance over a lunch date—“I am embarrassed by your persistence in wanting to claim more from me than I am prepared to give” (29)—or rejecting screenplays based on her novels, the correspondence reveals Gordimer’s determination to defend her work and the personal space needed to produce it. Responding to a Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. treatment of her novel *July’s People* in March 1989, Gordimer despairs about how her suburban protagonists Maureen and Bam are portrayed as “going native,” warping her novella into a colonialist imaginary of primitive tribalism: “What has been made of my screenplay is a soap opera with Tarzan touches, written by an incompetent hack. There are competent hacks, and one of them might have done what was necessary. This man was not one of them unfortunately” (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 436).

While showing Gordimer’s struggle to retain authority over localized narratives as they passed into global currency, the biography also reveals the unexpected transnational itineraries of her work—the fact, for example, that this same novel was a major influence on Philip Roth’s celebrated “American trilogy” of the late 1990s. “Perhaps you can understand how *July’s People* pointed me in the direction of *American Pastoral* (even if that’s a book you don’t care for),” Roth wrote to her in July 2000, “which in turn got me eventually to *The Human Stain*” (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 437). These are pathways of global influence and aesthetic connection that importantly reorient criticism about Gordimer’s writing.

At the juncture where her fiercely defended intellectual autonomy meets the challenge of separatism, self-reliance, and radicalism that came with the Black Consciousness movement of the 1970s, the central chapters of *No Cold Kitchen* are some of the most intellectually rich. "If Gordimer understood the legitimate rigours of Black Consciousness criticism," writes Roberts, "she was, like Soyinka and Mphahlele, equally alert to the bogus temptations of it" (338). Gordimer's growing awareness of BC's epochal significance (already intuited in the honorable failure that became "Not for Publication" in the 1960s) is balanced with her unwillingness to inhabit postures of easy political rectitude within the cultural system. In these sections, Roberts deems Gordimer "an unpatronising patron" in her position of cultural power and literary gatekeeping: "Encouragement of writers meant unsparing criticism" (143). The purpose of launching a "New Authors" scheme was not, Gordimer wrote to a Johannesburg publisher in October 1964, "to indulge in special pleading for work which is too indifferent to be launched in another way" (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 143). In a letter to Columbia academic Frank McShane on November 7, 1976, Gordimer "wondered over a piece of bad writing handed to her by a black friend during the 1976 Soweto uprisings": "Will he give himself refuge—dangerously, if he wants to write—in the lofty decision that as I'm white I can't judge what he has to say or how he says it?" (143).

Here again, Roberts's treatment of the correspondence gives us a rich account of a creative imagination assessing the possibilities and limits of its cultural predicament, and registering the complex responses to the activist forums in which she immersed herself. The contrarian in Roberts quotes with admiration her sketches of strained non-racial cultural gatherings in the 1970s. Writing to Per Wästberg in November 1978, Gordimer describes a PEN poetry reading in Pretoria, led by a writers' group called Kwanza:

People read their own work with sincerity and passion. Some of it was sung, to the accompaniment of drum, flute, penny whistle, mbira. . . . The sentiments are always moving and ninety-percent of the time poorly or/and banally expressed. The atmosphere is an incredible mixture of Deep South evangelism (biblical incantations of Mother Africa themes), American black consciousness phraseology, jazz-talk, Fanon-fervour, missionary-prize-giving formality. . . . We are all addressed, irrespective of race, as "brother" or "sister." This may mean little to you; but in South Africa at present such forms are generally reserved strictly for blacks. So how can one describe the moving sense of real brother/sisterhood, the warmth and welcome—and at the same time the glimpse of the spine-chilling depth of resentment and the anachronistic absurdities of our gathering[?] (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 354)

Such passages are left to stand for themselves in all their frankness, embarrassment, ambivalence, and irresolution—without the biographer needing to

overtake them with a meta-analysis. That is to say, in these sections the ambivalence of the biographer rides in tandem with that of his subject's own life writing project, producing a richly textured narrative that acknowledges both the social determinants of identity but also the contingencies and individual signature of self-making and the fragile process of building non-racial cultural spaces: "The fact is, it is such a delicate fabric that we have managed to weave crisscross," Gordimer writes to Sampson in September 1979 about a PEN conference organized by Es'kia Mphahlele, "we are aware that a snagged fingernail could rip it" (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 355).

### **"A LONG, SLOW MUTATION OF EMOTION"**

AMBIVALENCE, SUPERINTENDENCE, POLEMIC

In other parts of the book, however, the question of cultural "superintendence"—of who can assume critical authority, and over whom—comes to infiltrate and overdetermine all aspects of the biographical posture. "Superintendence" becomes a repeated word in the text, one that the biographer's prose snags on. In a letter to Sampson on June 26, 1959, Gordimer gives her reaction to Mphahlele's autobiography *Down Second Avenue*: the writer "emerges from it, as a personality, triumphant, I think. His own man, well at ease, in spite of everything" (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 80). Roberts comments, "The compliment was sincere and well-merited: the odour of assessing superintendence was perhaps inevitable" (80). This odd turn of phrase and overreading of the encounter reveals the latent subplot that will increasingly determine the biographical demeanor, as Roberts begins, compulsively, to critically assess Gordimer's own critical assessments. "The very cadences and criteria of praise," he goes on, "were inflected with the hierarchy in which they were involuntarily enmeshed" (80).

This hierarchy is the prism through which Roberts would eventually interpret the revoking of authorization and their disagreement. As I noted earlier, he maintained that Gordimer "was treating me like a benefactor in a certain way, as though I was a product of patronage rather than a professional" (Donadio). The entire biographical project gradually becomes involuntarily enmeshed in the problematic that it has been seeking to excavate. Questions of authority become entangled in questions of race and representation in a much more immobile and deterministic way. By the final sections, a far more hostile portrait emerges, with Roberts now revising his earlier findings, returning to and reprocessing earlier elements of Gordimer's life and correspondence.

Once an "unpatronising patron," Gordimer is increasingly figured as "bustling and parental; possessive" toward her Black literary contemporaries,

writing about them with "clucking regard" (289), her critical reflexes repeatedly lapsing into "the assessing gaze of the white cultural authority" (342). Her "constructive engagement with black consciousness" in the 1970s and 1980s is now framed differently, with recourse to academic tautology void of specific detail: "But it is true that Gordimer's voice occupied a space made vacant by the same racism that she deplored. In that sense she was indeed part of the intellectual economy of apartheid while the native was silenced" (623).

At the same time, the tone of the writing changes: this kind of overweening pronouncement is increasingly spliced together with sharp asides and anecdotes that are given the same valence. For example, we are told that the "most significant black post-apartheid voices" such as Zoë Wicomb and Zakes Mda "have relationships with Gordimer ranging from non-existent to prickly," and, as Roberts's presence in the biographical narrative becomes increasingly corrosive, the same page continues with phrases like: "'Gordimer hates women,' Wicomb told me, while Mda pointedly names J. M. Coetzee as his 'favourite' writer" (623). The tonal instability of the later sections creates an amalgam of discourses with different evidentiary bases and wildly varying kinds of authority, yet all these sentiments are run together as data points in an increasingly frenetic and internally competitive text.

The final section of *No Cold Kitchen* narrates how Roberts shuttles between Johannesburg and New York, repeatedly visiting Edward Said as both try to puzzle out Gordimer's position on Middle East politics—why she is unwilling to equate Israel's actions with those of apartheid South Africa and why she remains intimate with the Israeli novelist Amos Oz. "'Well, he is apparently very good looking,' a puzzled Said speculated—his provocation was deliberate—on why Oz is of any interest to Gordimer" (582). This kind of content is typical of the later sections, which presumably carry most of the "highly offensive additions" Gordimer complained of, marked by a tone that starts to veer uneasily from authoritative, high-minded pronouncement to tabloid-like point scoring, all of this amid an increasingly disparate welter of random quotation, intrusive asides, and what is best described as intellectual name-dropping.

As the cultural boycott wanes and South Africa becomes a locus of international attention in the transitional moment, Roberts indulges in a kind of global competitiveness or intellectual arms race with his subject, attempting to match her remarkable range of correspondents and interlocutors (from Sontag to Chinua Achebe, Kurt Vonnegut to Milan Kundera) with his own set of high-level connections. The prose becomes still more overwrought as Roberts now begins to write in Gordimer's prior objections:

In her marginalia on my manuscript alongside this comment Gordimer simply refused to accept the legitimate depth of Said's feeling about Oz. She demanded a watering down: "*What a cheap insinuation. Shame on you.*" Said's comment on Oz instinctively struck Gordimer as a departure from respectable protocols. (582, emphasis in original)

Insinuation, shame, respectability, protocol—all these problems are brought into play, and yet they are not placed in a trustworthy relation to each other. Roberts's judgmental interjections, writes one of the only academic respondents to the work, "sound like addenda inserted into a manuscript too near completion (and in any case far too long) to allow for the production of evidence and argument which might render them substantial" (Lenta 92). At another juncture, Roberts excerpts words by Sontag, Said, and Gordimer to produce a kind of playscript, with each "line" drawn from different publications or contexts of utterance. Their exchanges about whether Sontag should accept or refuse the Jerusalem Prize are all run together in a string of cryptic, decontextualized remarks, an artificially engineered drama that brings into sharp relief the oscillation between mandarin cultural pronouncement and ad hominem swipes:

Sontag: If I have to choose between truth and justice—of course, I don't want to choose—I choose truth.

Gordimer: I don't know how she can see truth and justice as separate. Sontag: Literature is the house of nuance and contrariness against the voice of simplification.

Said: Staggeringly bad. The worst thing I've read in the past 5 years . . . really unbelievable fudging and Barthesian preciosity, a lot of it only because it's Israel. Wow!

Sontag: He's a bit of a hack [i.e. Said]. (qtd. in *No Cold Kitchen* 576)

If many novels, including some of Gordimer's greatest, can be considered as artificial biographies, then can a biography be imagined as a fake novel? The inversion captures something of the tone of parts five and six of *No Cold Kitchen*, which carry the feeling of being focalized by an increasingly unreliable narrator, one whose tendentiousness needs to be continually factored in to recover some kind of truth claim from the text. The biographer figure now becomes a hyperactive, censorious presence, sifting the subject's output for increasingly minor and arbitrary infractions, which are then subjected to over-analysis that verges on the ludicrous. In picking over Gordimer's response to the American invasion of Iraq, Roberts goes as far as providing mid-sentence commentary to one of her op-eds: "my interpellations in bracketed italics"

(596). The paragraph as it appears in the biography gives some idea of the fraught pitch that the work reaches:

And I deplore the almost general laissez-faire attitude of the world [*Actually the world was unusually united in condemnation*] to the obvious power-manipulations [*Which ones? By whom?*] evidenced in the bungled and bloody "reconstruction" of the country [*Would a smooth conquest and occupation—the absence of bungle and blood—have "evidenced" an absence of these unspecified "power manipulations"?*]. . . . The consistent factor on all present conflicts [*all of them? India versus Pakistan? Ivory Coast? Tibet? Taiwan? Thwarted Irish Republicanism? Referenda on the European Union?*] is the vast gap between rich and poor [*Iraq was in fact relatively wealthy and potentially powerful in the region*], and the subliminal racism [*Was the racism of Abu Ghraib "subliminal" or crassly overt?*] that constitutes, under the seven veils of democracy [*Whose democracy? Iraq's puppet government? The court-appointed Bush regime that invaded Iraq?*], to justify it. [*Who regards "it" as justified and what is the "it" in question? Subliminal racism? The Iraq invasion? Democracy?*] (596)

Even typographically, the above gives an image of the increasingly labored, even absurd attempts of the biography to show up, outflank, and debunk its subject as the project moves to a close—or rather, falls apart. Gordimer's writing of the new millennium is generally treated in this way: as a kind of school exercise or exam script to be marked up by an all-knowing pedagogue who pounces on the smallest phrases, correcting, chiding, and querying. In a slow-building irony, the entire project comes to replicate precisely the kind of overweening cultural superintendence—the ex cathedra pronouncements, the unearned authority, the lack of self-awareness—that it previously deplored as an index of unaware white liberalism. Writing about Gordimer's correspondence with Sampson, Roberts comes to a judgment that is entirely apt for his own work: "The tone is pungent. Yet it is supremely knowing, effortlessly assessing, complacent in its own insights" (611).

Finally, *No Cold Kitchen* violates its own early and brilliant insights into the politics of identity formation, and so dilutes its own complexity. From seeing Gordimer as complexly *symptomatic* of the vexed and racialized history in which she is enmeshed, it moves to a more reductive vision of her as *emblematic* of it, until in the final parts we are left with little more than a "figure in a sociological report" (to borrow that *New Yorker* editor's phrase). The text takes on a tone of oppressive knowingness. Her every action and utterance—particularly her opposition to the Mbeki administration—is now deemed predetermined within a much narrower, predictable repertoire of subjectivity, one in which any words or actions by the subject are folded back into the already known. The text breaches its own intellectual ethics and its own readings of her novels. But the problem of what constitutes critical authority

or authoritative criticality is in turn symptomatic of a cultural moment far beyond the souring of relations between individual biographer and subject.

Until 1994 and the coming of South African democracy, *No Cold Kitchen* is able to portray and admire Gordimer as a fissile and fiercely individual intellect—one who disparages a certain strain of South African liberalism and allies herself with the liberation struggle but is also not shy of questioning the nativist assumptions of Africanist or Black Consciousness discourse, or hazarding a fictional trespass across racial lines. Yet post-1994, Roberts increasingly constructs the Nobel laureate as a pillar of the postapartheid cultural establishment—a grandee to be attacked and cut down to size, her style of critique now supposedly indistinguishable from the reactionaries and conservatives she spent a lifetime distancing herself from. Such transformations along different axes—within Gordimer’s life and work but also within the nature of the biographical project itself, and all of this sited within South Africa’s transition to democracy and freedom of expression—produce an overdetermined and tendentious book, albeit one that can still be read against the grain for its wealth of source materials, correspondence, and primary research.

For a work so attentive to the privileges and pleasures of criticism, *No Cold Kitchen* leaves open a series of important questions that have only become more vexed in the decade following its publication. What might a valid language of critique sound like in post-transitional South Africa? How can the ideal of an unaffiliated, unfettered critical intelligence evade the legacies of a suspect universalism, or a patronizing liberalism that discourses too confidently about others? How might progressive and reactionary languages of critique be disentangled, particularly when directed against the postapartheid state? What are the modes, textures, and terms of an intellectual freedom that might win a necessary authority in a place like contemporary South Africa? How does dire and persistent inequality warp and evacuate the language of intellectual exchange?

Roberts dodges and muddies these questions, possibly because of his own concurrent investment in a biography, or rather hagiography, of Thabo Mbeki during the later stages of the Gordimer project. The reflex of dismissing all criticism of a Black-led government as reactionary or crypto-racist was one that enveloped the Mbeki administration, an unfortunate corollary of the president’s strenuous commitment to African self-determination. This, at least, is the thesis of Mark Gevisser’s landmark biography *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (2007), another ambitious and intriguingly excessive life, but one that was published to enormous acclaim even as Roberts’s *Fit to Govern* (2007) was being pilloried.

Just as *No Cold Kitchen* culminates in an unremittingly hostile attitude to Gordimer's postapartheid persona as a cultural "type," the obverse of this position was Roberts's unswerving loyalty to an increasingly beleaguered head of state, one whose questioning of HIV/AIDS science and quiet diplomacy on Zimbabwe have been interpreted by many as a reaction, or overreaction, to the perceived "superintendence," the assessing gaze of Western cultural authority.<sup>12</sup> The poetics of interpersonal power that we see in the Gordimer-Roberts affair, that is, would play out on a much larger scale, and with far greater consequences than those of a single literary scandal. In assessing the vicious circle of crypto-prejudice and defensiveness that characterized the post-Mandela era, political analyst Steven Friedman suggests, "the Mbeki years were a lost opportunity to engage South Africa's most debilitating fault line," in that "the president and political leadership's particular form of preoccupation with race made it impossible to discuss productively the most salient of South African divides" (qtd. in Glaser 174). What I have hoped to show is that *No Cold Kitchen* registers a subtle but consequential shift from an intellectually open to a closed mode of engaging this fault line—and that this latent subplot comes to overdetermine the biographical narrative.

Gordimer's short story and abandoned novel "Not for Publication" ends with a silent impasse, a vision of a life that was not structurally available to the (fictional) biographer. By contrast, *No Cold Kitchen* turns the drama of writing across subject positions into a drama of ambitious excess, a chaotic and even carnivalesque work that plays across South Africa's vast scene of unresolved difference. Beginning as a dissenting biography, the text undergoes a slow mutation into a kind of biographical fiction, one that reveals more than it ever intended about the debased and damaged forms of authority produced by colonial and apartheid history, and about their enduring effects on the social body.

## NOTES

1. The title's kitchen metaphor is drawn in part from an epigraph by Doris Lessing: "The life of the house went on in the kitchen . . . She stood by the oven where various dishes were shortly to reach their moments of truth" (qtd. *No Cold Kitchen* 11). This title is evidence of Roberts's repeated biographical tactic of approaching Gordimer via her supposed cultural "rivals": Ruth First, Edward Said, and J. M. Coetzee among them. The title also suggests Gordimer's ability to withstand the heat of South African cultural politics. Presumably, she decides not to "get out of the kitchen" but rather to remain rooted in her Johannesburg home as a site where domestic rituals and fierce intellectual creativity were not set at odds.
2. On the question of curating and representing indigenous histories, see Skotnes (and responses to this work) as well as Rassool. On Krog and her use of testimony from the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Highman. On Zakes Mda and his use of the work of historian Jeff Peires, see Offenburger.

3. I am indebted here to *Scandal in the Colonies: Sydney and Cape Town, 1820–1850*, in which Kirsten Mackenzie explores how these unstable cultural processes tend to expand beyond the control and intention of the parties involved, and can be uniquely revealing of larger social torsions. Scandals, Mackenzie suggests, often signal a particular moment in cultural transformation, involving the “alleged transgression of boundaries that are themselves under construction and contestation” (9).
4. See Meersman for an even-handed survey of works on the Mbeki years, in which he deems Roberts’s *Fit to Govern* “an intellectual hagiography posing as an exegesis of Mbeki’s philosophy” (427). The work was dogged by allegations of considerable financial support brokered via the presidency, as well as accusations of plagiarism. HIV/AIDS dissident Anthony Brink would devote an entire, self-published, and often bizarre book to accusations that Roberts had plagiarized his work (see Brink).
5. These remarks were made by Susan Sontag in personal conversation with David Attwell in late 2003. Attwell was the organizer of the inaugural Nadine Gordimer Lecture at the University of the Witwatersrand, which Sontag delivered shortly before her death in 2004. Attwell sent me this information in personal communication.
6. These lines are from Malcolm’s infamous opening paragraphs to *The Journalist and the Murderer* (3).
7. Matshikiza’s article reads: “The man comes over from Trinidad, proceeds to insinuate himself with oleaginous charm into the heart of her intimate and public life and memoirs, and then accuses her of being racist when she tells him the book he’s so studiously worked on in Killarney Mall is not up to scratch” (32).
8. Short story writers, Gordimer suggested in an address of 1968, “see by the light of the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of—the present moment. Ideally, they have learned to do without explanation of what went before, and what happens beyond this point” (*Telling Times* 168).
9. See the introduction to *Selves in Question* for a comprehensive survey of life narrative in South Africa, where the editors Judith Lütge Coullie et al. remark that Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela’s *A Human Being Died that Night* (2003) is the first text in which a Black woman writes extensively, and psychobiographically, on a white South African male (19).
10. In his primer *How to Do Biography* (2008), Nigel Hamilton remarks that in nineteenth-century Britain, the best Victorian writers moved into the fictional arena of the novel partly as a response to biography being “so enchained by the rules of convention, social acceptability, and sheer hypocrisy”: “As a result the Victorian novel abounded in fictional biographies,” a domain free of the specters of libel, defamation, or social condemnation for daring to explore the private life of famous individuals (17). For the complex fate of this idea of literary “freedom” under the apartheid Censorship Board, see Gordimer, *What Happened to Burger’s Daughter?* and Peter D. McDonald, *The Literature Police*.
11. The phrase is from an early interview with Gordimer, cited and used as a chapter title in Rita Barnard’s *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (10).
12. See for example the essays collected in *Mbeki and After*, edited by Daryl Glaser.

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